Reconstructing King Midas

John Prag

In 1957 the team of American archaeologists led by Rodney Young working at Gordion, the capital of the ancient kingdom of Phrygia in central Turkey, finally entered the tomb chamber of the massive burial mound known traditionally as the "Midas Mound". Partly to frustrate ancient tomb-robbers there was no marker to the tomb and no sign of an entrance, and even after over 2600 years of erosion the mound still stood more than 50 m. high (originally it was probably half as high again), so there could be no question of simply digging it away to find the burial inside. Instead, the archaeologists had spent the previous season drilling into the mound on a grid-pattern until they located the stone casing that surrounded the tomb-chamber. Then they returned the following spring and drove a tunnel into the mound until they reached the tomb-chamber – itself an impressive structure, built of massive cedar or juniper logs that had survived perfectly in the sealed conditions of the mound.

What they found inside was even more impressive. Scattered around the chamber were over 350 bronze objects cauldrons, bowls, jugs, cups, ornaments, nearly all in a marvellous state of preservation so that with relatively little cleaning many still gleam like gold. There were three iron stands too, some inlaid wooden furniture, and at one end of the tomb the skeleton of a rather small elderly man 1.59 m (5' 2½") tall, and 60-65 years old, lying on a bed.

However, there were no inscriptions, nothing to identify the occupant, and despite the traditional name of the mound, Professor Young doubted whether the tomb was really that of the famous king Midas who according to Greek and Assyrian records ruled from 738 to 696 B.C. He died at the age of about 61 – perhaps by his own hand when his city was burnt by the barbarian tribe of the Cimmerians, who swept through Asia Minor at that time. Young thought that the Phrygians would not then have been able to afford so magnificent a burial for their king: he preferred it to have been the tomb of Midas' predecessor Gordios. But Keith DeVries (who took over the direction of the excavations when Young was killed in a car crash in 1974) argued that the kingdom of Phrygia did not come to an end with the attack of the Cimmerians (who soon moved on, to end up in the Crimea), and that what was by far the largest of the Phrygian burial mounds was most likely to shelter the tomb of her most famous king, the only one to have made his mark on international politics. He also noted that the style of the finds, and of the burial ritual, fitted the later date rather better.

From skull to face

Convincing though DeVries' arguments appear, they still lacked proof. In the same way Manolis Andronicos had been unable to find the final archaeological proof for what seemed the most likely identification for the occupant of the magnificent royal tomb which he had discovered at Vergina in Macedonia in 1977, as Philip II, the father of Alexander the Great. However, in this case the proof was provided by a close study of the skull by a British team from Manchester and Bristol Universities, comprising the writer of this article (an archaeologist), Richard Neave (a medical illustrator), and an anatomist, Jonathan Musgrave: in the course of creating a reconstruction of the dead man's facial appearance they identified an injury which had blinded the right eye, identical to that Philip II is known to have received at the siege of Methone in 354 B.C.

There are two stories that have become attached to Midas in Greek lore: first that everything he touched turned to gold (a foolish wish, granted as a reward by the gods); and second, that in helping judge a contest between Apollo, god of music, and Marsyas with his pipes, Midas favoured Marsyas, whereupon Apollo decreed that he must have the ears of an ass – which promptly sprouted from his head. Both stories have been regarded as fanciful, and parallels can be found in many parts of the world. But Greece was still poor at the time this king Midas ruled, and to a Greek traveller of around 700 B.C. all that gleaming, golden-coloured bronze must have seemed like fabulous wealth. So Dr. Veli Sevin of Istanbul University wondered whether there might not also be evidence for the ass's ears to be found on the remains, and with this in mind he invited members of the same British team to Ankara to study the skull. This was made possible thanks to the help of David French and his staff at the British Institute of Archaeology in Ankara, and above all of Professor Berna Alpagut at Ankara University.

We were able to study the skull in September 1988, and to produce a reconstruction of its facial appearance by following strict anatomical rules, based on statistical evidence for the thickness of the flesh taken over 21 points on the skull, coupled with a detailed knowledge of the anatomical structure of the face – a technique which aside from its use on other archaeological specimens has been tested by controlled experiments in the Manchester University Medical School and proven by forensic work carried out for several British police forces. The result is shown in the accompanying illustration: a rather long face, with the upper part lightly built but the lower portion and the jaw more massive. An elderly, pensive, rather unhappy man: he died in the sack of his capital city, after all – but this cannot be a true portrait, which must take into account the character of the person as well as his (or her) physical appearance; it can only suggest what the person *might* have looked like, given the fact that each of us has an individual, idiosyncratic skull which is all our own, and which dictates the shape of the face, whatever our age or physical condition.

"Midas has hairy pinnae'?

Although there is still much work to be done, the skull from the Midas Mound at Gordion has so far shown only two physical peculiarities: first, the markedly elongated shape of the back of the head, caused by deliberate 'cosmetic' bandaging when the individual was still a baby. And second, the noticeably protruding lower lip, which is the outward sign of an unusually sharply angled alveolar margin – the lower front teeth, in layman's language. John Lilley, a consultant at the Dental Hospital of the University of Manchester, who pointed out the significance of this feature, added that he had seen it on two (modern) teenage girls who had fallen from their horses: perhaps Midas had a similar accident when young.

But what of the ass's ears? We have consulted various specialists. There are several conditions that might give rise to such a story, but only one (a neurofibroma) would leave any trace on the bone. What seems – so far – to be the most likely answer was suggested to us by the Reader in Genetics at Manchester University, Dr Roger Wood: there is a hereditary condition, passed from father to son but never appearing in the female line, known as 'hairy pinnae', where at around the age of thirty hair sprouts from the outer and/or upper edges of the ear. In extreme forms it can take on a distinctly animal-like appearance: in fact more than one specialist has likened it to monkey's ears. Modern sufferers tend to shave their ears, or have their barber do it for them. And as Ovid and others tell us, Midas managed to keep the state of *his* ears secret from all save his barber. Only when the secret became too much for the poor man did he dig a hole down by the river and whisper the story into it, in order to bury it under the earth that he shovelled back into the hole. Even then it was only the wind blowing through the rushes which grew over the hole that carried the news far and wide, 'King Midas has ass's ears'. We cannot yet be sure that we have plumbed the king's secret all over again, but at least we can claim to be the first to have given it the serious medical and historical attention – for which Midas would I am sure have been grateful, if he could have had it in his lifetime. Perhaps we have gone a little way towards restoring him to life, away from the ridicule that he seems rather unfairly to have won.

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